

FOOD & WINE

How to Pair Wine and Cheese Like an Expert

There's never been a better time to explore wine and cheese in America.

BY JONATHAN CRISTALDI



Photo: VICTOR PROTASIO

Have we entered a golden age of wine and cheese pairings? Cheese is on the same journey as wine, with more cheesemongers ushering an array of classic and trendy new cheeses to American dinner tables. Some of the finest, award-winning cheeses are available in most local supermarkets, so divining a good wine and cheese pairing today is easier than ever.

Laura Werlin, a James Beard Award-winning author with six books on cheese including *Cheese Essentials* and *Grilled Cheese Please*, suggests the reason is simple. “Wine and cheese are two very humble products that are both fermented and both taste like the place where they came from,” she says. Pairing them together is really about having fun, she says. “Don’t let your head get in the way.”

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Werlin says that one simple rule is to be aware is acidity. “The least successful pairings are most likely to happen with super oaky, low-acid wines,” she says. “Cheese tends to bring out the tannins in oak. What you’re looking for in the wine is some degree of acidity to cut through the richness of the cheese.” If you’re uncertain about the level of acidity in wine, ask a knowledgeable friend or wine retail expert to guide you.

I asked Master Sommelier Matt Stamp, co-owner of the restaurant and wine shop Compline in Napa, California, for more tips. Stamp says to “save the big reds for aged cheeses with grainier, crumbly textures. Light crisp white wines often call for fresher cheeses; you can easily pair zesty, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc with tangy goat’s milk cheeses like chevre or feta.” His favorite pairing is Madeira and a good aged Cheddar because “the nutty tones in the cheese and wine are genius together.”

Beyond classics like brie and chunks of Parmigiano, some of the trends are leaning toward more Alpine-style cheeses, which are “similar to Comté in France, Gruyère, and Appenzeller,” Werlin says. “I’m also seeing more spruce-wrapped cheeses along with mixed-milk cheeses. And we’re beginning to see more booze in cheese, like Ubriaco, a ‘drunken’ unpasteurized cow’s milk cheese infused with wine, which you so don’t want to like, but I’m sorry—it’s really good.”

With some guidance from Werlin, here are 13 delicious wine and cheese pairings, painstakingly tested over a couple of weeks. Let this list serve as a basic guide. There are no hard and fast rules, and by all means, experiment!

Soft-Ripened Triple-Cream Cheese: Cowgirl Creamery Mt Tam

Wine Pairing: 2017 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay Napa Valley

Montelena winemaker Matt Crafton suggested a triple cream or an aged comté with his Chardonnay—a taste-test that didn’t require much arm-twisting of my wife to help me decide. We landed on Cowgirl Creamery’s Mt Tam, a three-week aged, pasteurized cow’s milk triple cream. Though the style of Chardonnay, which is really fresh, with integrated oak spices and zesty acidity, really lends itself to both the triple cream and comté. The creamy, buttery quality of the Mt Tam seems to imbue the Chardonnay with richer floral, fruit, and mineral qualities, while the comté, rich with nutty, earthy notes, is something to enjoy with an aged Chardonnay, like Montelena’s, which after five to seven years in the bottle develops buttery, caramelly, and earthy notes.